

Eastbourne Choral Society The Armed Man review. 29/6/13

A lovely mix of differing styles of music welcomed us to the twentieth year of the Eastbourne Choral Society, founded in 1993 by Elizabeth Muir Lewis and succeeded as Musical Director ten years later by John Hancorn. The choir is well known for performing a wide variety of music and tonight's performance bore this out.

The programme began with a cycle of spirituals set by John Rutter and titled "Feel the Spirit", which command the choir obeyed by singing with great gusto and enthusiasm and which introduced us to soloists Nia Coleman, soprano and Rebecca Leggett, mezzo soprano. These two young women, aged 22 and 17 respectively, showed a real promise of great things to come. Nia Coleman's lyric soprano was clear, even toned throughout and soared effortlessly to her top notes. It was refreshing to hear a young voice which was not pushed, but nevertheless reached the back of the church with crisp articulation. Likewise the voice of Rebecca Leggett, warm and rich in her top range and she showed real emotional depth throughout all her pieces. I look forward to hearing more from these two young artists. Choir member Shirlene Billenness sang the solo in "I got a Robe" with the flair that we have come to expect of her and the whole was accompanied by the Eastbourne Chamber Ensemble and the very able accompaniment of Nancy Cooley. The spirituals were followed by two short songs, "Come to me in my dreams" – a beautiful interpretation by Nia Coleman of a Frank Bridge composition – nice to celebrate with a piece by a local Composer, as Bridge was born in Brighton but later lived in Friston, although he is mostly known now for having taught Benjamin Britten. Rebecca Leggett then sang "Fish gotta swim" from the musical Showboat with lots of lovely colour and a pleasing emotion and accompanied by John Hancorn.

It was now the turn of Elizabeth Muir Lewis to wield the baton for a setting of "The Blue Bird" by Stanford, which showed the sensitivity of the choir to great effect and the clarity of the soloist, Nia Coleman. The audience enjoyed this piece very much. Sadly, the second piece, "Requiem Aeternam", a setting of Elgar's "Nimrod" for choir, suffered from being just too high for the sopranos

to do it justice and the sound was over-bright. A pity, as it was a lovely arrangement of this piece.

“The Armed Man”, a composition specially commissioned from Karl Jenkins by the Royal Armouries Museum to commemorate the millennium, is something of a “marmite” work. I have known many who loved it or loathed it in turn. There are undoubted moments of great drama, as in the opening 15th century French fighting song L’homme arme, which was slightly reminiscent of the call to arms of Les Miserables with the same rousing appeal – that is by no means to diminish it. Karl Jenkins used many combined elements to portray the horrors of War and the call to peace, including Charge – brilliantly sung by the choir – and followed immediately by a silence and then The Last Post, played perfectly by solo trumpet, Marcus Plant. All the ensemble played with enormous sensitivity and one of the joys of this work is that it gives the percussionist a chance to shine as they are on show all through the piece. Jess Dann did not disappoint at all in this task. The dynamics of the various elements, with their differing cultural backgrounds, were well realised by the choir and all performers and it was beautifully conducted under the direction of John Hancorn. A thoroughly enjoyable evening and heartfelt congratulations to all involved.